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Little Red Berries Pack a Big Punch

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Cranberries have been used for food and medicine for centuries. Now studies are showing just how many benefits they provide.

Cranberries produce a special chemical, a high-molecular-weight nondialysable material known as NDM. NDM prevents bacteria from sticking together or adhering to surfaces. This is how cranberries protect against urinary tract infections. NDM fights “sticky” bacteria that cause problems in other areas of the body as well. Bacteria in the mouth stick to the teeth and form bacterial plaque, which is a major cause of gum disease and tooth decay. NDM prevents gum disease-causing bacteria from sticking together and forming plaque. Experimental mouthwash containing this special cranberry chemical has been shown to decrease the levels of the bacteria that cause tooth decay in the mouth. NDM also helps the rest of the digestive tract by blocking stomach ulcer-causing bacteria from sticking to the stomach lining.

Cranberries are a functional food powerhouse rich in antioxidants and other phytochemicals. The flavonoids and polyphenols in cranberries increase high density lipoprotein (HDL) (“good” cholesterol) and lower low density lipoprotein (LDL) (“bad”

cholesterol). High LDL levels speed the formation of plaques on artery walls, making them larger and harder. Arterial plaques can cause heart problems such as angina, heart attacks, and blood clots.

Cranberries have anti-inflammatory, antioxidant compounds, such as resveratrol, which have been shown to fight numerous kinds of cancer cells in laboratory tests. Hopefully, future studies will show which cancers can be prevented by including cranberries in the diet.

A lot of nutrition is packed into this little red berry. One cup of fresh cranberries contains 47 calories, 4 grams of fiber, and 13 milligrams (mg) of vitamin C with only minimal amounts of fat (.2 grams) and sodium (1 mg.). Go easy on dried cranberries though; a 2-ounce serving provides 209 calories.

Given their many health benefits, these cheerful berries should not just be reserved for the holidays. Fresh cranberries are most plentiful from September through December. Cranberries store well (about two weeks in the refrigerator) and a year in the freezer. They require no preparation before freezing and the frozen berries do not have to be thawed before cooking.

Include cranberries in your diet as a way to meet your goal of eating five to thirteen servings of fruits and vegetables a day. A daily 10-ounce serving of a 100 percent fruit juice containing 27 percent cranberry juice helps to maintain a healthy urinary tract. Fresh cranberries, dried cranberries, and cranberry sauce offer the same benefits. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Toss cranberries into green salads for a tasty treat.
- Mix fresh cranberries with fruit salad.

- Use cranberries in baked breads or muffins.
- Substitute cranberries for raisins in your favorite recipes.
- Sprinkle a handful of dried cranberries over hot or cold cereal.
- Mix a few dried cranberries with lightly salted, roasted nuts.
- Serve cranberry relish with turkey, chicken or pork.
- Drink hot cranberry juice cocktail for a change of pace.

For more information on cranberries, go to www.cranberryinstitute.org. Ideas for including a variety of fruits and vegetables in your diet, including cranberries, can be found at www.5aday.com.

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